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Eduard Nielsen's *Oral Tradition* Sixty Years After¹

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ABSTRACT: When Eduard Nielsen's *Oral Tradition* appeared in 1954 the author's main motivation for writing it was frustration with what was felt as serious shortcomings in current methods of Old Testament research. Influenced by "Scandinavian" scholarship (above all Pedersen, Nyberg, and Engnell), Nielsen wishes to replace historical critical approaches with more adequate, updated methods. In particular, he wants to integrate insights into the oral processes that lead to the creation of the literature of the Hebrew Bible into his exegetical techniques. For comparative purposes, Nielsen utilizes texts from ancient cultures where orality was predominant. He discusses above all Greek, Mesopotamian, and Old Norse sources. In view of the huge interest in orality and memory in academia today it is obvious that Nielsen was far ahead of his time. It is more than regrettable that so little attention has been paid to this pioneering work.

1. Background

Eduard Nielsen was awarded the *candidatus theologiae* degree from the University of Copenhagen in 1947. Apparently, he developed very soon an interest in Scandinavian tradition historical studies. The first substantial manuscript that Nielsen submitted (to my knowledge) was for a Aarhus university academic competition. The set title for the prize essay was on the importance of oral tradition for the origin of the Old Testament. Nielsen was awarded the Gold medal in 1949. The manuscript forms background material for the monograph *Oral Tradition* that appeared in 1954.²

¹ Eduard Nielsen, *Oral Tradition: A Modern Problem in Old Testament Introduction* (*Studies in Biblical Theology*; London: SCM Press, 1954).

I am thankful to the editors of this Festschrift for the kind invitation to celebrate Eduard Nielsen. I spent spring semester 1981 in the Department of Biblical Studies in *Købmagergade 46*, courtesy Eduard Nielsen. Eduard had in those days already for many years been the undisputed doyen of Danish Old Testament studies. He and his colleagues provided me with perfect surroundings for writing up my dissertation before submission. I still remember vividly the friendly, inspiring, and enthusiastic atmosphere, combined with the highest academic standards (and Danish *frokost*!). I am also grateful to Eduard for accepting my manuscript for publication in the *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*. Over the years, Eduard became a very good friend.

² The Aarhus University Prize text appeared in print (in slightly revised versions) as four different papers in *Dansk Teologisk Tidsskrift*. Eduard Nielsen, "Jeremia og Jojakim", *DTT* 13 (1950), pp. 129-145 (this is Nielsen's first published work) and "Mundtlig tradition I-III", *DTT* 15 (1952), pp. 19-37, 88-106, and 129-146. The initiative for publishing the 1954 monograph came from Harold H. Rowley (an inveterate literary critic!). In the preface, Rowley mentions that he also made some

Eduard Nielsen's *Oral Tradition* will attract interest for a variety of reasons. The slim volume of one hundred and eight pages constitutes Nielsen's very first major academic project. It also represents the international debut of a scholar whose distinguished career should last for many decades. At the same time, both oral studies in relation to the Hebrew Bible and oral studies in general are huge areas of research today. For this reason, it would also be of interest after all these years to look into how Nielsen's book has stood the test of time.

From the short, introductory chapter in *Oral Tradition* we learn how Nielsen reflected on the nature of academic studies pertaining to the Old Testament around 1950. The birth of Nielsen's project was above all a result of dissatisfaction with traditional biblical scholarship the way he was trained. Nielsen is inspired by contemporary Scandinavian research. For this reason, he wants to introduce a Scandinavian alternative.³ However, Nielsen starts with a short survey of some major proponents for the historical critical school that he wants to replace, including comments on their views on oral literature.⁴

As representatives of Scandinavian scholarship, Nielsen refers to Henrik Samuel Nyberg (1889-1974), Harris Birkeland (1904-1961), Sigmund Plytt Mowinckel (1884-1966), Karl Ivan Engnell (1906-1964), and Geo Widengren (1907-1996).⁵

minor changes in the English language of the manuscript. I quote from the last paragraph: "It is my hope, therefore, that the final result is an accurate rendering, which will not be displeasing, and which will enable students to judge for themselves how far the new methods can supplement the old and how far they can successfully replace them" (*Oral Tradition*, p. 9).

³ I am not using the label "Uppsala school" as I do not find this term adequate. There is nothing original in this, and others have held similar views. See, for instance, Helmer Ringgren, "Mowinckel and the Uppsala School", in *The Life and Work of Sigmund Mowinckel*, ed. Hans M. Barstad and Magnus Ottosson (*SJOT*, 2; Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1988), pp. 36-41, 36. However, unlike Ringgren, I find terms like "Scandinavian School" equally misleading. Every single scholar working in, or originating from, a Scandinavian country has to be assessed on the basis of what she or he has actually written. A lot of unscholarly ink has been wasted, and a large number of strange statements have been made about scholars whose work is classified as "Scandinavian". I am not going to comment any further on this issue. Still useful is Douglas A. Knight, *Rediscovering the Traditions of Israel: The Development of the Tradition-Historical Research of the Old Testament, with Special Consideration of Scandinavian Contributions* (*SBLDS*, 9; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1973), and later editions. Knight has not only read and understood his sources adequately, but he is also fluent in more than one Scandinavian language.

⁴ The small, but highly representative selection refers, in order of appearance, to works by Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932), Martin Noth (1902-1968), Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918), Karl Budde (1850-1935), and Adolphe Lods (1867-1948). See *Oral Tradition*, pp. 11-12.

However, Nielsen's short introduction also reflects that there were major disagreements among Scandinavian scholars. Yet again, we are reminded of the lack of basis for talking about a Scandinavian "school."

2. Nielsen's Main Influences

Quite relevant in relation to an assessment of Nielsen's project, of course, are words straight from the horse's mouth. In the following quotation from the preface, Nielsen himself characterizes the articles in *Dansk Teologisk Tidsskrift* on which his English monograph is based.

The fundamental views of these articles are characteristic of the traditio-historical 'school', I think. They are at any rate greatly inspired by the views of Pedersen, Nyberg and Engnell. My detailed exegesis of, e.g., Gen. 6-9 or Mic. 4-5 is of course entirely my own.⁶

As we may see from the text above, Nielsen refers to Johannes Pedersen (1883-1977), Nyberg and Engnell as his major inspirations. For this reason, I will discuss these scholars separately in some detail below.

In chapter II, "Oral Tradition in the Near East", Nielsen presents us with a potpourri of texts in order to provide documentation for orality in antiquity.⁷ Throughout his volume, focus is on texts that support his overall claim that oral texts are more important than written ones. However, his is not a one-sided or biased approach to the problem. At the same time, Nielsen also brings in texts in support of writing. His basic view is that the modes of oral and written existed side by side over long periods. This opinion would in fact correspond to the way most scholars consider these issues today.

Nielsen's selection of texts comprises Mesopotamian, Islamic, early Jewish, early Christian, classical Greek, Vedic, ancient Israelite, Icelandic, Persian, and Egyptian examples. The intensity of his engagements with extra-biblical sources vary from mere references in passing to fairly lengthy discussions of texts that have obvious relevancy for the oral debate in Old Testament research. For this reason, each and every example in *Oral Tradition* has to be discussed independently. Unsurprisingly, Mesopotamian sources are treated in some length and constitute a most important part of the book. However, Nielsen's use of Greek and Icelandic sources is equally convincing. Moreover, his discussions of extra-biblical texts reveals state of the art knowledge of contemporary (around 1950) Akkadian and Icelandic scholarship. Used with caution, some of his arguments are still valid today.

2.1 Greek Sources

⁵ *Oral Tradition*, pp. 13-17. The names are listed in the order in which they appear in the book.

⁶ *Oral Tradition*, p. 9. The best way to find out how Nielsen himself understands the term "tradition history" is to read the last part of his book. Chapter IV (pp. 63-103) is called "Examples of Traditio-Historical Method".

⁷ *Oral Tradition*, pp. 18-38.

Nielsen is fascinated by the importance of memory and orality in ancient cultures altogether. But he also wishes to remind us all that these basic issues, neglected by both academy and society, are still relevant. He wants to stress the importance of orality beyond the time when *Oral Tradition* was published.

Again, his enthrallment to orality does not at all lead him to one-sidedness. One will find that Nielsen, throughout his monograph, demonstrates very balanced views. He is well aware of the fact that the two modes, oral and written, very often existed simultaneously. The same cautiousness and sound methodological principles are found also when Nielsen discusses Mesopotamian, Icelandic, Hebrew, or other ancient sources.

Nielsen's main inspiration among Greek authors is Plato.⁸ A lengthy quote from the *Phaedrus* forms a part of his background material for promoting orality in general. At the same time, Nielsen also warns against the exaggerated status of writing and the printed word in his (our) contemporary culture.⁹

A lack of partisanship is also reflected in his use of Plato. Nielsen reminds us that even if the *Phaedrus* has a very negative view of writing, the *Ion* criticizes those who memorise literature.¹⁰ However, Nielsen also underlines that what we are dealing with in the *Ion* is disapproval of empty external memorization without sound and adequate understanding.¹¹ His sound judgement concerning the relationship between written and oral is demonstrated also when he discusses Homeric epics.¹² Similar views would in fact be among the most favoured also in recent research.¹³

⁸ *Oral Tradition*, pp. 22-23, 31, 34. When Nielsen left school in 1941 (*Østre Borgerdydskole*) he had undergone a complete training as a classicist. He is, therefore, eminently qualified to work with Greek and Latin primary sources.

⁹ *Oral Tradition*, pp. 22-23. The English translation of Plato is that of Harold N. Fowler (1859-1955), with a foreword by Walter R. M. Lamb (1882-1961). H. N. Fowler, *Euthyphro; Apology; Crito; Phaedo; Phaedrus* (Loeb Classical Library; London: Heinemann, 1913). As there is no full reference to this work, I have "reconstructed" the lacking details. There are some further reflections on issues relating to writing in the *Phaedrus* in *Oral Tradition*, p. 34, n. 2.

¹⁰ *Oral Tradition*, p. 31, n. 2. Again, there is no reference. For the *Ion*, Nielsen would have used the translation by Fowler and Lamb, *The Statesman, Philebus, Ion* (Loeb Classical Library; London: Heinemann, 1913). In this edition, Lamb did the translation of *Ion*.

¹¹ *Oral Tradition*, p. 31, n. 2. Nielsen further refers to two texts in Xenophon in support of this claim (*Symposium* III, 5b and *Memorabilia* IV, ii, 10).

¹² *Oral Tradition*, p. 31.

¹³ The recent literature is quite comprehensive, and I cannot really comment on in the present context. For convenience, see Rosalind Thomas, *Oral Tradition and Written*

Nielsen's use of Greek sources in *Oral Tradition* is of significance for his overall project on the relationship between oral and written texts in antiquity. What he writes about these texts should therefore not be looked upon in isolation. Rather, the Greek evidence has to be considered as a part of the wider corpus of extra-biblical texts that he discusses.

2.2 Mesopotamian Sources

Mesopotamian (Sumerian and Akkadian) texts feature prominently in *Oral Tradition*. This, of course, is what one would expect. Similar to what the situation should be like today, these texts appear to be among the most appropriate for comparative purposes in relation to the Hebrew Bible. Nielsen demonstrates intimate knowledge of the most relevant literature in this area. His sources include also the always important, but unfortunately occasionally neglected contributions from *Assyriologie francophone*.¹⁴ Nielsen shows convincingly throughout *Oral Tradition* how adequate Mesopotamian texts can throw light upon, and even lead to a better understanding of, the Hebrew Bible. He also regrets the lack of such insights in much of the scholarship of his time.

As we see, yet again, Nielsen is touching upon topics that are as relevant in the debates of today as they were in the nineteen-fifties! Among the issues that Nielsen deals with in *Oral Tradition* we find: learning by heart (pp. 19-20), scribes and writing in Mesopotamia (pp. 25-30), writing in Mari (pp. 43-44), as well as a remark on the notion of the "heavenly book" in Mesopotamia (p. 62). As his comparative method is sound, many of his arguments are valid even today. However, as Nielsen's Mesopotamian sources represent the state of the art sixty years ago each and every case has to be looked into individually.

Equally important as the "minor" details mentioned above are more overall views relating to Mesopotamian sources for a better understanding of the Hebrew Bible in general. Here, too, there are some continuous overlaps between topics discussed in

Record in Classical Athens (Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Studies, 18; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. See also by the same author, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Key Themes in Ancient History; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

¹⁴ Georges Dossin 1896-1983 (p. 43, n. 3); Charles-François Jean 1874-1955 (p. 43, n. 3 and p. 44, n. 3); Jean-Robert Kupper 1920-2009 (p. 43, n. 3 and p. 44, n. 3), and René Labat 1904-1974 (p. 20, n. 3). His other authorities, too, are all leading Assyriologists. Also in alphabetical order, the list consists of Erich Ebeling 1886-1955 (pp. 19-20, n. 3 and n. 1-2); Adam Falkenstein 1906-1966 (p. 27, n. 1); Peter Jensen 1861-1936 (p. 19, n. 2 and n. 3); Jørgen Alexander Knudtzon 1854-1917 (p. 30, n. 1); Samuel Noah Kramer 1897-1990 (p. 27, n. 1); Jørgen Læssøe 1924-1993 (p. 26, n. 1 and n. 2 and p. 44, n. 3 and p. 62, n. 1); Henry F. Lutz 1886-1973 (p. 28, n. 2); A. Leo Oppenheim 1904-1974 (pp. 19-20, n. 3 and p. 62 n. 1); Otto Schroeder 1851-1928 (p. 29, n. 1); Wolfram von Soden 1908-1996 (p. 44, n. 3); Ferris J. Stephens 1893-1969 (p. 20, n. 2), and Otto Weber 1877-1928 (p. 41, n. 1). References in parenthesis indicate where the works in question are discussed in *Oral Tradition*.

Oral Tradition and the debates of today, notwithstanding changes in mentalities or new editions of texts. One major topic here would be the debate on the nature of ancient Israelite prophecy. I deal a little more with this issue in section 2.6 below.

2.3 Icelandic Sources

Equally important to Nielsen as Mesopotamian sources is research done on orality by Nordic saga scholars. Old Norse texts are different from Akkadian ones. Nevertheless, their value as comparative evidence is not lesser (if used with caution!). In this respect, the Icelandic material may be considered as similar to parts of the Greek evidence referred to above.¹⁵

To illustrate Nielsen's concern a little further, it may be convenient to provide a quote from his book:

What consequences does a reduction to writing involve? What really happens when one makes use of writing? It has too often been asserted from an insufficient knowledge of the oral practice within ancient cultures that the reduction to writing involves the first literary (in the true meaning of the word) treatment of the traditions, the editing and grouping of a formless mass of tradition. What has been said above should have shown that this theory is untenable. Far nearer to the truth are those who claim that a reduction to writing means in the main only that a tradition in a more or less fortuitous form is fixed on paper.³ And yet something new has happened. It is // not only a purely technical matter, the inauguration of a different method of transmission, which clearly shows its departure from the usual one by the appearance of a series of different text-variants, but an impersonal intermediary link has been introduced between the bearer of tradition and the receiver. Where the oral form of education was the predominant one, and where great emphasis was laid on the personal contact between teacher and pupil,¹ this inanimate intermediary link in a living tradition can hardly have had immediate consequences of any importance. But if one imagines the living chain of tradition weakened, even cut off, so that only the documents are left, then the interpretation first and foremost becomes a problem when the tradition is to be resurrected.¹⁶

As we see, the assumptions that Nielsen makes concerning the nature of orality in ancient Israelite society based on comparisons with Norse sagas are very advanced for its time. By comparing Homeric, Norse, and ancient Israelite literature, he is able to suggest convincingly that written documents in all three of these cultures were meant to support and control oral recitation. In addition to Meissner, he also refers to Knut Liestøl (1881-1952).¹⁷ Nielsen's discussions, his use of comparative source material,

¹⁵ For some brief remarks on "historical" and "typological" comparisons, see Hans M. Barstad, "*Comparare necesse est?* Ancient Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy in a Comparative Perspective", in *Prophecy in its Ancient Near Eastern Context: Mesopotamian, Biblical, and Arabian Perspectives*, ed. Martti Nissinen (SBLSS, 13; Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2000), pp. 3-11.

¹⁶ *Oral tradition*, pp. 33-34. Footnote 3 on p. 33 refers to Rudolf Meissner (1863-1948) for support. See Rudolf Meissner, *Die Strengleikar: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der altnordischen Prosaliteratur* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1902), p. 104. Footnote 1 on p. 34 is a reference to Pedersen, *Den arabiske Bog*, pp. 14 and 18 f. who deals more in detail with this issue.

¹⁷ Knut Liestøl, *Upphavet til den islenske ættesaga* (Instituttet for sammenlignende kulturforskning. Serie A. Forelesninger, 10a; Oslo: Aschehoug, 1929). The first

as well as his fine understanding of academic debates on Icelandic sagas are not too far away from what goes on in the discussions in this area today.¹⁸ For support within folklore studies, Nielsen refers to Axel Olrik's (1864-1917) so-called "Epic Laws".¹⁹ Olrik would be regarded as outdated nowadays.

2.4 Johannes Pedersen

Above, we noticed how Pedersen is mentioned in the first place in Nielsen's preface (before Nyberg and Engnell). In my view, this "ranking" is not unintentional. In all likelihood, Pedersen's influence on Nielsen is far greater than what might be expected from the scattered references to his books throughout *Oral Tradition*.

Nielsen's use of Pedersen's now classic work *Den arabiske Bog* concerns mainly the role of oral tradition in relation to the Quran. Muslim scholars had to learn the whole Quran by heart, and to be able to recite any part of it from memory.²⁰ The role of Pedersen's substantial volumes *Israel I-II* and *Israel III-IV* in *Oral Tradition* vary.²¹ There is one reference to the role of the *pater familias* in relation to oral teaching in the family.²² There is also mention of the destruction of Jeremiah's prophecies and the Baruch roll.²³ Finally, there is a reference to Pedersen in Nielsen's discussion of the deluge in biblical tradition.²⁴

Pedersen was a brilliant scholar, and his contributions to the tradition history of the Hebrew Bible have inspired many. Nielsen is clearly familiar with his work. Pedersen's work on the Passover traditions is still very influential. It is now available

English edition of this book is, *The Origin of the Icelandic Family Sagas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930). Liestøl is referred to in *Oral tradition* on pp. 32 and 35-37.

¹⁸ See, for instance, *Oral Art and Their Passage into Writing*, ed. Else Mundal and Jonas Wellendorf (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2008).

¹⁹ *Oral Tradition*, p. 36. There is no bibliographical reference to Axel Olrik's works in Nielsen's footnotes. For a useful edition of his work in English, see: *Principles for Oral Narrative Research (Folklore Studies in Transition)*; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992).

²⁰ Johannes Pedersen, *Den arabiske Bog* (København: Fischer, 1946). See *Oral Tradition*, pp. 21, 34, and 59. There is now also an English translation, Johannes Pedersen *The Arabic Book* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

²¹ The other books referred to are the two volumes Johannes Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, Vols. I-II 1926. Vols. III-IV 1940).

²² Pedersen, *Israel I-II*, p. 58.

²³ Pedersen, *Israel III-IV*, p. 70.

²⁴ Pedersen, *Israel III-IV*, p. 101.

to a larger audience as it also appears in English.²⁵

2.5 Henrik Samuel Nyberg

Even if influence from Engnell (see 2.6 below) is easily detectable throughout *Oral Tradition*, the role of Nyberg for this early work cannot be exaggerated. The authority of Nyberg's commentary on Hosea is spotted all the way through Nielsen's monograph.²⁶ Nyberg's epoch making book inspired many who were frustrated with the then current exegetical and text critical procedures in the study of the Hebrew Bible.

A quotation from the introductory chapter of Nielsen's book may be in place here:

H. S. Nyberg is the first of those who call for mention. The main purpose of his pioneering and epoch-making work *Studien zum Hoseabuche* is to warn against, and to combat, a prevailing tendency among Old Testament scholars to surmount the difficulties of the Massoretic text, either by means of more or less arbitrary textual emendations, or by using the old translations, especially the Septuagint, without any clear method. But in addition the author also touches upon question of oral tradition, its extent, its significance, and its reliability. Later we shall return to this important study, but for the present we content ourselves with sketching the progress of research.²⁷

A string of so-called text critical editions of the Hebrew Bible has been published during the time that has elapsed since the occurrence of Nyberg's book in 1935. There can be little doubt that some of them occasionally expose a lack of method in the text critical apparatus.²⁸ Since it was published such a long time ago, it is difficult to evaluate Nyberg's book on Hosea for today. However, some assessments are

²⁵ Pedersen, *Israel* III-IV, pp. 728-37. Originally published as Johannes Pedersen, "Passahfest und Passahlegende", *ZAW* 52 (1934), pp. 161-75.

²⁶ Henrik S. Nyberg, *Studien zum Hoseabuche: Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Klärung des Problems der alttestamentlichen Textkritik* (Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift, 6; Uppsala: Lundequistska, 1935). Only once (*Oral Tradition*, p. 21), a reference to Nyberg is not to the Hosea commentary. In an enumeration of various ancient cultures that prefer oral to written Nielsen refers to Henrik S. Nyberg, *Irans forntida religioner* (*Olaus-Petri-föreläsningar vid Uppsala universitet*; Stockholm: Svenska kyrkans diakonistyrelses bokförlag, 1937). This important work is also in German: *Die Religionen des alten Irans* (*Mitteilungen der Vorderasiatisch-ägyptischen Gesellschaft*, 43; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich, 1938).

²⁷ *Oral tradition*, p. 13. Nyberg's influence is clearly seen also on the following pages. In Nielsen's short introductory chapter, there are references to Nyberg on pp. 14-17. See also pp. 21, 24, 39, and 75.

²⁸ On this large topic, see, for instance, John Wm Wevers, "Text History and Text Criticism of the Septuagint", in *International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament: Congress Volume, Göttingen 1977* (VTS, 29; Leiden: Brill, 1978), pp. 392-402.

definitely too negative.²⁹

Few, I hope, will disagree with Nyberg's main principles. Among them, we find claims that we should listen to the text rather than try to change it according to text-external or anachronistic mentalities. Accordingly, what we might refer to as Nyberg's challenge to all exegetes of the Hebrew Bible is basically sound. Also, we have to admit that fully satisfactory solutions to these problems have not been found during the years following the publication of *Studien zum Hoseabuche*.

Moreover, the importance of Nyberg for the presentation here concerns not only the nature of the text of the Hebrew Bible in general but also his views on oral tradition. As it may be helpful for illustration, I reproduce a couple of paragraphs from Nyberg's epoch making volume.

Die Überlieferung ist im Orient selten eine rein schriftliche; sie ist überwiegend *eine mündliche*. Die lebendige Rede spielte von jeher und spielt immer noch im Orient eine grössere Rolle als die schriftliche Darstellung. Fast jeder Niederschrift eines Werkes ging im Orient bis in die jüngste Vergangenheit hinein eine längere oder kürzere mündliche Überlieferung voraus, und auch nach dem Niederschrift bleibt die mündliche Überlieferung die normale Form für die Fortdauer und die Benutzung eines Werkes.³⁰

And:

Das schriftliche AT ist eine Schöpfung der jüdischen Gemeinde nach dem Exil; was dem vorausging, war sicher nur zum kleineren Teil schriftlich fixiert. Natürlich hat man im vorexilischen Palästina geschrieben, ob aber in irgendeinem Umfange zu rein literarischen Zwecken, ist doch sehr die Frage. Die Schreibkunst wurde vorwiegend praktisch verwertet, zu Kontrakten, Verträgen, Denksteinen — in diesen Fällen hatte die Schrift auch magische Bedeutung — wohl auch zu offiziellen Verzeichnissen und Listen, und vor allem natürlich zu Briefen. Nach assyrischem Vorbilde wurden offizielle Annalen geschrieben; möglich, dass auch gesetzliche Texte von grösserer Bedeutung schriftlich fixiert wurden. Aber die konkrete Geschichtsüberlieferung, die epischen Erzählungen, die Kultlegenden, zweifelsohne auch im allgemeinen die Gesetze müssen wesentlich mündlich tradiert worden sein. Mit Schriftstellern und den Propheten und Dichtern hat man sicher nur unter der allergrössten Reserve zu rechnen.³¹

2.6 Ivan Engnell

²⁹ For instance Martti Nissinen, *Prophetie, Redaktion und Fortschreibung im Hoseabuch: Studien zum Werdegang eines Prophetenbuches im Lichte von Hos 4 und 11* (AOAT, 231; Kevelaer-Neukirchen Vluyn: Butzon & Bercker-Neukirchener Verlag, 1991), especially pp. 2-9, but also elsewhere.

³⁰ Nyberg, *Studien zum Hoseabuche*, p. 7. It is important that this small excerpt is not read or used in isolation from the rest of Nyberg's introduction (pp. 1-20). Even if Nyberg's work has many useful observations, some of them valid also today, it has to be taken into consideration that the book was written in 1935.

³¹ Nyberg, *Studien zum Hoseabuche*, p. 8. See Nielsen, *Oral Tradition*, pp. 24-25. However, all of chapter III of Nielsen's book (pp. 39-62) is organized as a testing out, or validation, of the thesis of Nyberg.

There are quite a few references to Engnell's works throughout *Oral Tradition*.³² The following citation from the book gives a useful indication of how Nielsen himself assesses influences from Engnell.³³

In 1945 Ivan Engnell published the first part of his *Gamla Testamentet: en traditionshistorisk inledning*,² a work planned on a generous scale. He tries to open new paths for research in Old Testament introduction, and his book is remarkable for a religio-historical orientation which has nothing in common with the prevalent 'evolutionistic'³ conception of the religion of Israel. A whole chapter in the book (pp. 109-167) is devoted to this subject. His general views are too well-known to need any outline here. The outstanding feature of his book, however, is its vigorous repudiation of the still current method of literary criticism. At the same time he emphasizes the role of oral tradition, and stresses the anachronistic way in which modern Western-European science applied to texts from antiquity points of view that belong to the sixteenth to twentieth centuries. Even though he advances his point of view very forcefully Engnell is far from a rabid or blind insistence on a favourite hypothesis. On the contrary, like Nyberg, he emphasizes several times that the question of the existence and // significance of oral tradition demands different answers for different kinds of literature.¹ Engnell has given a more varied study of the prophetic literature in his 'Profetia och Tradition',² a work that may be regarded as an answer to Mowinckel's *Prophecy and Tradition*,³ published the same year.

A few comments in relation to the above excerpt may be in place here. It is one of the tasks of the present contribution to attempt to evaluate Nielsen's views in light of present day research and mentalities. Apparently, we do not need to read much before we realize that many of the opinions put forward in *Oral Tradition* correspond quite clearly to what may be regarded as *status quo* in academia today. Both Engnell and Nielsen were early pioneers and ahead of their time.

The break down of historical critical research and its methods is at the forefront of present day biblical research. Important initiatives "started" in the mid nineteen sixties under the umbrella the "Bible as Literature Movement". Since then, during the last 30-40 years or so, this faction has developed from a minority group into comprising a large majority of scholars working in the area of Hebrew Bible and Old Testament studies. Only in Germany, the birthplace of historical critical research, has these approaches been less influential.³⁴ From the brief quotation above, we also learn

³² Ivan Engnell, *Gamla Testamentet: En traditionshistorisk inledning. Första delen* (Stockholm: Svenska kyrkans diakonistyrelse, 1945 [the second part was never published]), referred to on pp. 14, 15, 33, and 97; "Profetia och tradition: Några synpunkter på ett gammalt testamentligt centralproblem", *SEÅ* 12 (1947) pp. 110-139, referred to on pp. 15 and 66; *The Call of Isaiah: An Exegetical and Comparative Study* (Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift, 4; Uppsala: Lundequistska, 1949), referred to on pp. 14, 17, and 52; *Profetismens ursprung och uppkomst: Ett gammalt testamentligt grundproblem* (Religion och Bibel, 8; Lund: Gleerup, 1949), referred to on p. 54.

³³ *Oral Tradition*, pp. 14-15.

³⁴ For a survey of some of these changes, see Hans M. Barstad, "What Prophets Do: Reflections on Past Reality in the Book of Jeremiah", in *Prophecy in the Book of*

how Engnell's attack on cultural evolutionism and "scientific" views on texts from antiquity also play an important role in his *Gamla Testamentet*.³⁵ Nowadays, some of these issues are debated within the wider critique of positivism and historicism. There can be little doubt that the views of Engnell and Nielsen would have been accepted by a majority of scholars who work in these areas today.

A further issue in the passage above concerns the nature of Engnell's scholarship in general. It is more than likely that Engnell's academic legacy has suffered undeservedly from a bad reputation. Again, this would often be the result of claims made by researchers who have misunderstood his agenda, or perhaps not read his books and articles. As we may see from the extract quoted above, Nielsen, too, comments on the nature of the views of Engnell. He points out that Engnell in fact both had a relaxed relationship to his own method and that he was neither fanatical nor monolithic about it. Nielsen also defends him against what he considers to be misrepresentations of his views. For instance, he points out, and rightly so, that Widengren has clearly misunderstood Engnell's position, as well as his use of Nyberg's ideas. Moreover, both Engnell and Nielsen are opposing Widengren's uncritical use of Arabic and Ugaritic sources for comparative purposes.³⁶

As we may see from the quote reproduced above there is also a reference to Engnell, "Profetia och tradition" in the same context. I would like to comment a little further on this particular issue. The disagreement between Mowinckel and Engnell concerned the nature and origin of Hebrew prophecy. In particular, they disagreed on the

Jeremiah, ed. Hans M. Barstad and Reinhard G. Kratz (BZAW, 388; Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), pp. 10-32.

³⁵ Nielsen defines "evolutionistic" as: "In the sense of steadily evolving from lower to higher levels". See, *Oral Tradition*, p. 14, n. 3. This feature plays an important role in his book. On this "anti-evolutionism", see, for instance, the following quotation: "The change from oral to written literature does not take place because cultural summits have been reached, nor because the ability to read and write has become common property, but because the culture itself is felt to be threatened—from within by syncretism, and from without by political events.// This change occurred, for Judah, presumably towards the end of the seventh century or at the beginning of the sixth, for northern Israel, perhaps a century and a half earlier. But it is neither consummated all at once nor does it put an end to oral transmission" (*Oral Tradition*, pp. 60-61).

³⁶ See *Oral Tradition*, pp. 16-17. The reference is to Geo Widengren, *Literary and Psychological Aspects of the Hebrew Prophets* (Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift, 10; Uppsala: Lundequistska, 1948). This is the only work by Widengren that Nielsen cites. For further mentioning of *Literary and Psychological Aspects*, see *Oral Tradition*, pp. 14, 20, 21, 28-29, and 78. These remarks concern mostly minor issues, where Nielsen refers to Widengren for support, or he signals differences of opinion. One major disagreement concerns the importance of oral tradition. Whereas Nielsen claims that orality is the most distinctive characteristic of many ancient cultures, Widengren holds the opposite view and argues for writtenness as the most widespread feature. However, Nielsen himself is rather tolerant with regard to this issue, and he never refers to Widengren in a negative manner. See, for instance, *Oral Tradition*, p. 21.

relationship between words of doom and words of salvation.³⁷ It was, when Nielsen's book was published, and up till quite recently, common to assume that pre-exilic prophecy consisted of judgement oracles alone. Since Hosea, Isaiah and Micah were only prophets of doom, none of them ever spoke any words of salvation. According to consensus, all positive statements in these books must therefore consist of later textual additions.

Mowinckel, too, shared this view. Engnell and Nielsen attacked this outdated position. Both of them considered Hebrew prophecy to form an integrate part of ancient Near Eastern prophecy. As parts of a wider, international prophetic culture, words of doom and of salvation went hand in hand both in ancient Israel and in the surrounding areas. Moreover, according to Engnell and Nielsen, Amos is not at all the first prophet to arise in ancient Israel. The texts of the prophetic books reveal a complexity that can only be explained if we accept the existence of a long oral tradition behind them. For this reason, we may also regard the prophetic words as far more reliable and trustworthy than some scholars claim. Today, these views belong among the most favoured among prophecy researcher.³⁸

The nature of ancient Israelite prophecy is not the only issue where Nielsen disagrees with Mowinckel. He also finds Mowinckel too sceptical concerning the reliability of oral tradition.³⁹ Likewise, he displays a negative view of Mowinckel's thesis on the various sources in the Book of Jeremiah.⁴⁰ Today, it is the views of Nielsen and Engnell, not of Mowinckel, that are considered most acceptable.

3. Conclusion

³⁷ *Oral Tradition*, pp. 13-15. Works by Sigmund Mowinckel referred to here are: *Jesaja-disiplene: Profetien fra Jesaja til Jeremia* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1926); "Opkomsten av profetlitteraturen", *NTT* 43 (1942), pp. 65-111; *Prophecy and Tradition: The Prophetic Books in the Light of the Study of the Growth and History of the Tradition* (Avhandlingar utgitt av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo, II. Historisk-Filosofisk Klasse, Nr. 3; Oslo: Dybwad, 1946).

³⁸ The most recent study that I have come across in support of the double role of prophets as announcers of both words of doom and words of salvation is a forthcoming study by Hugh Williamson. See H. G. M. Williamson, "Isaiah - Prophet of Weal or Woe or?", in *Thus Speaks Ishtar of Arbela": Prophecy in Israel, Assyria and Egypt in the Neo-Assyrian Period*, ed. Robert P. Gordon and Hans M. Barstad (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012). For a very useful survey on the relevancy of Near Eastern prophecy for the Hebrew Bible, see Martti Nissinen, with contributions by Choon-Leong Seow and Robert Kriech Ritner, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East* (SBLWAW, 12; Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2003).

³⁹ *Oral Tradition*, pp. 13-14 and elsewhere.

⁴⁰ See *Oral Tradition*, pp. 74-78. Works referred to are Sigmund Mowinckel, *Zur Komposition des Buches Jeremias* (Skifter utgitt av Videnskabselskabet i Kristiania, II. Historisk-Filosofisk Klasse, Nr. 5; Kristiania: Dybwad, 1914) and Mowinckel, *Prophecy and Tradition*.

The purpose of Eduard Nielsen's *Oral Tradition* was to introduce a tradition-historical alternative to current historical-critical methods. Among his main concerns was the noticeable lack of interest in orality in relation to ancient Israelite traditions within contemporary exegetical practices (around 1950).

Following this insight, Nielsen further advocated the need for placing the traditions of the Hebrew Bible firmly within the literatures and cultures of the ancient Near East. Only in this way could the biblical texts be properly understood, according to Nielsen. Moreover, in order to illustrate his points, he also makes the most of a variety of sources from ancient cultures that were predominantly oral. Mesopotamian sources figure most importantly throughout *Oral Tradition*. However, ancient Greek and Icelandic (Old Norse) literature is also used for illumination.

Nielsen combines pertinently selected text corpuses with access to state of the art secondary literature in all areas under scrutiny. The way this is done, reveals a superb master at work. Moreover, Nielsen also demonstrates a fine understanding of what kind of methodological issues should be involved in comparative studies. He claims, as a matter of course, that extra-biblical text should only be used for comparative purposes if there are valid reasons to do so.

Finally, inspired above all by H. S. Nyberg, Nielsen is also concerned with the nature of the Masoretic text. In particular, he emphasizes the occasional complete absence of method in textual emendations based on the versions.

Today, as we know, the academic study of "orality" and "memory" have become *huge*. For that reason, my appraisal of Nielsen is twofold. *Oral Tradition* should not be assessed only as an expression of intellectual mentalities of the late nineteen-forties and early nineteen-fifties. Equally interesting as a contribution to Nielsen's contemporary scholarly community is to what degree his work has stood the test of time. In my survey above, I have shown how Nielsen represents the interdisciplinary forefront of his time. However, many of his viewpoints are valid also today.

Moreover, it is not very useful to refer to, or to dismiss, Nielsen as a "Scandinavian" scholar. His attack on positivism and historicism form a part of an international trend in the academy. Today, when this has become the majority view (less in biblical studies than elsewhere in the academy), it ought to be seen much clearer that *Oral Tradition* has not had the impact it deserves. The book is an excellent contribution to international, non-insular, scholarship. Nielsen's state of the art secondary sources represent scholars from many different nationalities; Austrian, Belgian, British, Danish, Dutch, French, Hungarian, Italian, Israeli, North American, Norwegian, Swedish, and Swiss.

All scholars referred to by Eduard Nielsen in *Oral Tradition* are assessed on the basis of the adequacy and quality of their ideas, not because they belong to certain "schools". It would be equally misleading to refer to the scholarship of Pedersen, Nyberg, and Engnell as "Scandinavian". All three are international scholars who take part in a worldwide debate with important contributions.

Today, 60 years after the publication of *Oral Tradition*, we can (with hindsight)

respond to Rowley's (fatherly) concern:

It is my hope, therefore, that the final result is an accurate rendering, which will not be displeasing, and which will enable students to judge for themselves how far the new methods can supplement the old and how far they can successfully replace them.

The methods referred to by Rowley have already been replaced. Unfortunately, it may be the case that not everyone is aware of the changes.